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ABSTRACT

In 1993, about 21 million persons in the United States (about one-fifth of the total in nonagricultural industries) worked part time (fewer than 35 hours a week). Although the majority of persons working part time do so voluntarily, over the past 2 decades the number of involuntary part-time workers, those who want full-time jobs but who settle for part-time work, has increased dramatically. Voluntary part timers are likely to be women aged 25-54, young people aged 16-24, or older people (aged 60 and over). Involuntary part-time workers who usually work part time are also more likely to be women aged 25-54 or young people. A much higher percentage of men are represented among the involuntary part-time workers who usually work full time, usually as the result of business cycles. All of the increase in part-time workers from 1973 to 1993 was among involuntary part-time workers who usually work part time. This increase in the ratio of part-time workers to the total is accounted for entirely by the faster growth of industries that employ many part timers. In particular, the growing share of jobs in services, retail trade, and finance, insurance, and real estate resulted in a small rise in the proportion of workers who are employed part time. As a result of the recession of 1990-91, the number and the proportion of workers who were involuntarily on part-time schedules rose but did not decrease at the end of the recession as it had in previous cycles. (KC)

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ED 396 169

Issues in Labor Statistics

U.S. Department of Labor
Bureau of Labor Statistics

Part-time Work: A Choice Or A Response

In 1993, about 21 million persons—nearly a fifth of the total in nonagricultural industries—worked part time, that is, less than 35 hours a week. The vast majority of persons working part time do so voluntarily. Over the past two decades, however, the number of involuntary part-time workers, those who want full-time jobs but who settle for part-time work, has increased dramatically. This rise in involuntary part-time employment has raised concern not only because of the problems it can cause individual workers, but also because it represents an underuse of the Nation's labor resources.

Characteristics of part-time workers

There are differences between the voluntary and involuntary components of part-time employment. Differences also occur among involuntary part-time workers based on whether they usually work part time or full time.

An example of a person working part time involuntarily who usually works part time might be a worker who takes a night or weekend job in a department store, because he or she can find no other work. The schedule for such a job might be 25 hours a week, and that is all the worker can consistently expect to work. In contrast, a typical person involuntarily working part time who usually works full time might be a construction worker who only works 3 days during the week because one job ended and no other work was immediately available. If the ordinary weekly schedule for such a worker was 40 hours or more, he or she would be classified as usually working full time.

Age, sex, and race. Voluntary part timers are likely to be women age 25 to 54, young people (age 16 to 24), or older people (age 60 and over). (See table.) For each of these groups, the choice of working part time appears to be tied to a desire to combine work with other activities, such as raising children, going to school, or retirement interests.

The involuntary part-time workers who usually work part time are also more likely to be women age 25 to 54 or young people, although the proportions in those age groups are somewhat smaller than they are for voluntary part-time workers. However, older workers are not disproportionately represented in this group.

Among the involuntary part-time workers who usually work full time, there is a much higher proportion of men age 25 to 54 than in the other two groups. Young people (particularly those age 20 to 24) also are overrepresented in this group. One area of similarity among the two groups of involuntary part-time workers is that both have relatively high proportions of minority workers, while the voluntary part-time group has a relatively low proportion of minorities.

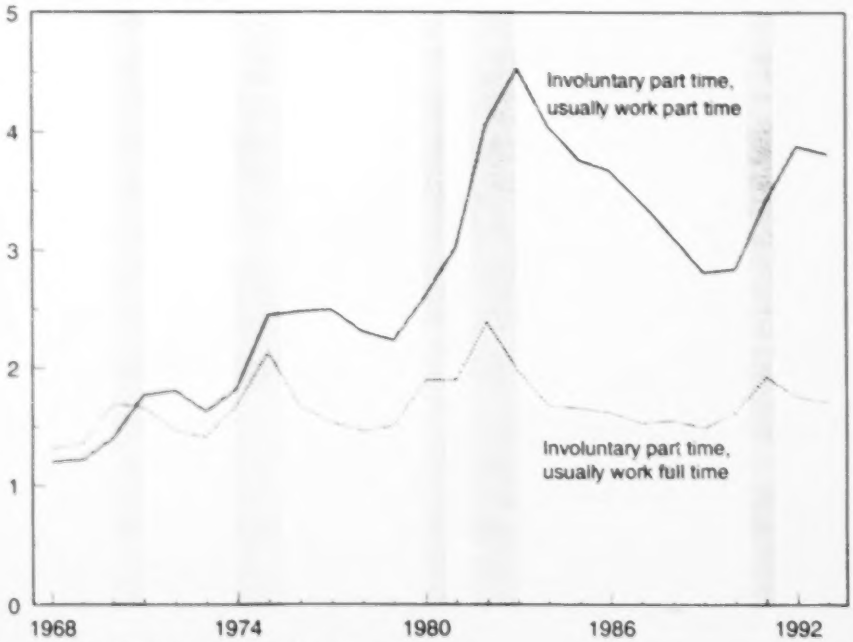
Trends in part-time work

Between 1973 and 1993, the proportion of persons at work who were part timers rose from 16.6 to 18.8 percent. All of the increase was among involuntary part-time workers who usually work part time. The ratio of that group to the total number of persons at work grew in a steplike pattern as sharp increases during recessions were followed by smaller declines in the ensuing recoveries. In contrast, the proportion of involuntary part timers who usually work full time has remained relatively steady, except for up and down movements during business cycles. (See chart.) The proportion of all persons at work who are voluntary part-time workers also has been relatively stable, fluctuating around 13.6 percent.

Although the ratio of voluntary part time to total employment has not changed since the early 1970s, the trend has varied among worker groups. Working women age 25 to 54 now are less likely to be voluntary part-

Persons at work part time for economic reasons in nonagricultural industries, 1968-93 annual averages

(Percent of total at work)



NOTE: Shaded areas indicate recessions.

Summary 94-11
October 1994

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Persons at work in nonagricultural industries by part-time status, age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin, 1993 annual averages

Category	Total at work	Voluntary part time	Involuntary part time		
			Total	Usual full time	Usual part time
Total, 16 years and over	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
16 to 19 years	4.7	20.4	9.8	5.2	11.9
20 to 24 years	10.4	15.4	16.4	13.1	17.8
25 to 54 years	73.2	45.0	63.2	71.5	59.4
55 years and over	11.8	19.2	10.6	10.2	10.8
Men, 16 years and over	54.0	30.8	46.6	59.5	40.9
16 to 19 years	2.3	9.6	4.8	2.9	5.6
20 to 24 years	5.4	6.4	8.1	7.7	8.2
25 to 54 years	39.7	7.1	29.1	42.8	22.9
55 years and over	6.5	7.7	4.7	6.1	4.1
Women, 16 years and over	46.0	69.2	53.3	40.5	59.1
16 to 19 years	2.3	10.8	5.0	2.2	6.3
20 to 24 years	5.0	9.0	8.3	5.4	9.6
25 to 54 years	33.4	37.9	34.1	28.7	36.5
55 years and over	5.3	11.5	5.9	4.1	6.7
White, 16 years and over	85.9	89.3	81.1	82.0	80.6
Black, 16 years and over	10.3	7.3	15.0	14.5	15.2
Hispanic origin, 16 years and over	7.6	5.6	12.9	14.1	12.3

NOTE: Detail may not add to totals due to rounding. Detail for race and Hispanic-origin groups will not sum to totals because data for the "other races" group are not presented and Hispanics are included in both the white and black population groups.

time workers, while workers age 16 to 24 and working men age 55 and over are more likely to choose part-time work. In contrast, the long-term increase in the number of involuntary part timers who usually work part time has occurred among virtually all worker groups.

A rise in the proportion of workers who are employed part time can result from an increase in the proportion of part-time workers within industries or from faster growth among industries having a large proportion of part-time workers. For example, between 1979 and 1990 the increase in the ratio of part-time workers to the total is accounted for entirely by the faster growth of industries that employ many part timers, rather than a rise in the proportion of part-time workers within industries. In particular, the growing share of jobs in services, retail trade, and finance, insurance, and real estate resulted in a small rise in the proportion of workers who are employed part time.

The start of a recession in the middle of 1990 brought another increase in involuntary part-time employment. Both the number and the proportion of workers who were involuntarily on part-time schedules rose between mid-1990 and the fall of 1991. Unlike the experience in prior business cycles, it then showed little movement through 1992 and 1993, despite the fact that the recession's low point was in March 1991. In each of the four prior recoveries, the number and proportion of involuntary part-time workers had dropped sharply after the end of the recession.

The recovery of the labor market during the recent business cycle has been unusual in several other respects. In particular, nonfarm payroll employment continued to decline for 11 months after March 1991, and the unemployment rate did not reach its highest point until June 1992. Thus, the trend in involuntary part-time employment over this period fit in with the larger picture of sluggishness in the labor market.

The data on part-time workers in this report are from the Current Population Survey (CPS) which is conducted each month by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. However, because the data are for 1993, they are based on the procedures for estimating part-time employment prior to the introduction of the redesigned CPS questionnaire in January 1994. The questions on part-time work were substantially altered on the redesigned questionnaire.

For more information on this study, contact the Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2 Massachussetts Ave., NE., Washington, DC, 20212, (202) 606-6378. Information in this report is available to sensory impaired individuals upon request. Voice phone: (202) 606-7828; TDD phone: (202) 606-5897; TDD message referral phone: 1-800-326-2577.

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